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SUBJECT: INITIAL REACTIONS TO POST INITIATIVES TO ENGAGE
MOSTLY MUSLIM NORTHERN NIGERIA IN THE WAKE OF SEPTEMBER 11

1. This cable reports initial reactions from two Post initiatives to engage mostly Muslim northern Nigeria in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. (Large numbers of Muslims are also in other parts of Nigeria, especially the populous southwest. Nigeria probably has the largest Muslim population in all of Africa.) The initiatives are "Magama", a Hausa-language monthly magazine, and a series of targeted mailings to Muslim leaders. Some have decried our efforts as American propaganda and even those who praised the Embassy for undertaking direct communication in Hausa were not always swayed by the policy arguments conveyed. But the reaction so far has been overwhelmingly positive.

2. The first issue of "Magama", distributed at the end of January, went to 5,000 influential Hausa speakers in northern Nigeria. Its content was heavily oriented toward the U.S. response to terror and the effects of that response--especially in Afghanistan, which had been liberated from Taliban control. The cover photo was a close-up of a smiling Afghan woman.

3. The very first response we received was from a radio commentator at popular Aso Radio across town in Abuja. He read excerpts of the incriminating Bin Laden tape taken from "Magama". Upon leaving the station that day, he was accosted by some angry young men who accused him of being an American propagandist. He defended reading the excerpt and, in fact, asked for an extra 10 copies of the magazine.

4. Another response reflected a similar division between radical and moderate Muslims. In Kaduna, a hotbed of fiery Muslim clerics, a sheikh walked into the mosque before Friday prayers a week ago holding a copy of "Magama", which he showed to the Muslim faithful already seated in the mosque. He denounced "Magama" as "an attempt by America to spread propaganda because they know we are unhappy with their attacks on Muslim brothers in Afghanistan." The sheikh also condemned the recent visit to Nigeria by U.S. Speaker, Dr. Aly Abuzakouk, who spoke to both Christians and Muslims about peaceful co-existence through interfaith dialogue. Fortunately, the Chief Imam arrived and countered the sheikh's claims about "Magama". He told the congregation that "Magama" was not propaganda, but a means of sharing information on U.S. policies towards Islam and other issues. He said "Magama" should be seen as an instrument of peace, not conflict. He also said the U.S. took the right decision by bringing Dr. Abuzakouk to talk about peace.

5. Some other reactions, in the form of letters or personal encounters, from readers of the first issue:

"I am writing to you to show my appreciation to you for creating this important magazine, "MAGAMA." It shows thoughtfulness and foresight on the part of the Public Affairs Section of the American Embassy to keep the community well informed.

I would like to use this opportunity to call on all Northerners, other Nigerians and Hausa speakers in general to show interest in "MAGAMA" and to read the Magazine regularly. I have no doubt in my mind that by reading "MAGAMA" our people would be more enlightened on U.S. policies and other World affairs, such as the question of the State of Palestine."

"I commend the wisdom of the United States Ambassador to Nigeria Mr. Howard Jeter in starting this magazine, and for finding time to explain America's bilateral assistance to the developing world with details of the war against terrorists."

"I am very pleased with the introduction of this magazine, aimed at explaining in detail the war against terror. This magazine is very important because it will help educate a large number of Muslims, who erroneously believe that this war is against Islam, and that America is only using Usama bin Laden as a scapegoat to justify the war. Now your magazine is proving that this notion is not true, just as it is in the Holy Koran, which says that no one has a right to take another person's life."

"I read your report suggesting that before the Taliban, Afghan women were allowed to go to work and that in other democracies women contribute in nation building as medical doctors, nurses, teachers, journalists, judges and so on. I would like to inform you that Islam forbids women from mixing freely with men just for the sake of seeking earthly rewards. Islam allows women to attend marriages, naming ceremonies, condolences, and to visit their families, but for a woman to just go out and do the kind of things your magazine talks about is improper. It is against Islam. If these are the kinds of story your magazine wants to circulate, I don't want to read your magazine again."

"I want to express my displeasure with the sufferings that Muslims have been subjected to by America's unjust war against Islam. The aim of this war is to destroy Islam, which is impossible. I would like to continue reading your magazine."

"It is very good that you are communicating with us in our language, but you should cut back the propaganda; it is too heavy. We want to read more about Nigeria and Africa."

16. In addition to publishing "Magama" (the second edition just hit the streets), Post has begun to translate Washington File items into Hausa and distribute them not only to the usual media contacts, but to a growing list--now totaling 167--of Muslim leaders: clerics, legislators, traditional rulers, youth leaders, Islamic scholars, teachers, and women's leaders.

17. Again the response has been strongly positive. We have placed our translated policy items in influential print and broadcast media in northern Nigeria. One of the radio stations alone--FRCN Kaduna--reaches 25-30 million listeners. Following are some of the reactions from the Muslim leaders, most of whom are pleased to get the materials and want us to continue:

"It was thoughtful of you to deem it appropriate to send to us such wonderful and informative articles on happenings in the United States as a fallout from what befell the U.S. on 11th September, 2001. The gesture will facilitate a better understanding of U.S. policies in this war against terror."

"While the forum members are open to dialogue, we believe that the US will contribute to world peace by fighting injustice wherever it exists, putting a halt to its selective war against innocent Muslims. The first place to begin is Palestine. Yes, we are interested in receiving these articles."

"The documents enclosed are indeed most educative and refreshing. I wish to point out that there is no mention of African Muslims' contributions in the on-going public dialogue and look forward to having such."

"I particularly like the abridged paper of Dr. Diana L. Eck. Though I am aware that the U.S. Government is tolerant of religious pluralism, the paper in question did put the magnitude of such tolerance in clearer perspective."

"We would like to thank you for your articles and reports on terrorism, including the original Arabic transcript of the alleged Usama bin Laden video tape. We shall make our thought on the issues known to you in due course, while looking forward to more articles in the future."

"I am happy that you realized that we are in the capacity to organize and educate our fellow brothers and sisters about the policies of the United States of America on the war against terrorism, which I am made to understand after

going through the articles, is not directed towards Muslims or the Islamic religion."

18. Post plans to expand the circulation of "Magama" by 1000 copies per issue and we will ratchet up the size four pages per issue from the current 16 inside pages until we reach 32 pages. This will allow us to give more generous coverage to US-Nigerian relations; MPP issues like democracy, bilateral cooperation on law enforcement, HIV/AIDS, and regional security and the mil-to-mil relationship, while keeping a strong focus on the War on Terror.
Jeter